

EFFECT OF SELF-ASSESSMENT OF WRITING PROCESSES VERSUS PRODUCTS ON EFL STUDENTS' WRITING

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INTRODUCTION

Several language learning theoreticians (e.g., Farr and Tone, 1994; Grubaugh and Speaker, Jr., 1991-92; O'Malley and Pierce, 1996; Thomas and Barksdale-ladd, 2000) advocate the use of self-assessment to improve students' writing. Such theoreticians claim that self-assessment promotes self-reflection, self-esteem, and self-confidence which can, in turn, improve students' writing. However, there are two diverging views on this issue. At one extreme, some educators (e.g., Cunningham and Cunningham, 1987; Kirsznier and Mandell, 1989; Lebauer and Scarcella, 1992; Radecki and Swales, 1988) call for self-assessing the products of writing. Advocates of this view claim that this type of self-assessment helps students to master the writing conventions which can, in turn, enhance their writing. They also claim that self-assessing the outcomes of writing helps students to evaluate the degree of attainment of the writing-program goals. However, this type of self-assessment ignores the cognitive processes students go through in producing their writing. At the other extreme, some educators (e.g., Angelo and Cross, 1993; Dickinson, 1987; Johnston, 1987; Keh, 1990; Lehr, 1995; Lynch, 1982; Reid, 1988) call for self-assessing the processes of writing. Advocates of this view claim that this type of self-assessment helps students to bring the writing processes into conscious awareness which can, in turn, improve their writing outcomes. They also claim that self-assessing the processes of writing helps students to tailor strategy use to the purpose of writing, and to select the writing strategies that suit the writing task. However, this type of self-assessment has been criticized for neglecting the conventions of writing (Myers, 1997). It has also been criticized for interfering with the normal processes of writing and--even if it occurs at the end of writing--students may forget or inaccurately recall the strategies they used before and during writing (Hayes and Flower, 1983).

The two opposing viewpoints mentioned previously inevitably led to the question: Should students focus on writing processes or products in assessing their own writing? The purpose of this study, therefore, was to compare the effect of self-assessment of writing processes versus products on the quantity and quality of EFL students' writing.

REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH

Unfortunately, no studies have compared the effect of self-assessment of writing processes versus products on L1 or L2 students' writing. Instead, a considerable body of research investigated the effect of training students in the writing process on the development of their writing (e.g., Hertz, 1991; Kim, 1991; Leland, 1986; MacArthur et al., 1995; McCabe, 1986; Vaughan, 1983). A second body of research investigated the effect of self-assessment of the product of writing on students' composition (e.g., Diaz, 1999; Smolen et al., 1995).

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

In light of the previously mentioned literature, the hypotheses of the study were stated in the null form as follows:

- (1) There would be no statistically significant difference in the pretest mean scores between the process group and the product group on the quantity or the quality of EFL students' writing.
- (2) There would be no statistically significant difference in the posttest mean scores between the process group and the product group on the quantity or the quality of EFL students' writing.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects for the study consisted of two intact classes totaling 80 students. These classes were randomly selected from the first-year classes enrolled in general secondary schools in Menoufya School

District during the 2001/2002 academic year. All subjects were males and native speakers of Arabic.

The subjects also included the two English language teachers of the classes participating in the study. Both teachers had more than ten years of teaching experience. And both were males and were judged by their principals and supervisors as highly qualified teachers.

Materials

The materials for the study consisted of twenty composition topics. These topics were selected in terms of eliciting the various types of writing including narrative, descriptive, persuasive argumentative, and analytical writing.

Research variables

The independent variables for the study were: (1) self-assessment of the processes of writing, and (2) self-assessment of the written products. In the process condition, each student self-assessed the strategies he actually employed before, during, and after writing. In the product condition, each student self-assessed his written product.

The dependent variables for the study were the quantity and quality of EFL students' writing as measured by the pre- and posttests.

To neutralize extraneous variables, all the subjects in the study were not informed of their participation in an experiment. The researcher also visited each of the two classes six times to ensure that each instructor was implementing the assessment technique assigned to his class using the same composition topics and the free-writing method. Furthermore, the training time for the two classes was identical.

Instruments

Two free writing tests were used in the study. One was used as a pretest and the other was used as a posttest. In the pretest each student

was asked to write a composition about the role TV plays in our lives. The directions for this test read as follows:

You will have fifty minutes to write as much as you can about the assigned topic. Also, write as accurately as possible. You must stop writing at the end of fifty minutes.

The posttest test required each student to write a composition about the impact of computers on our life. The directions for this test were the same as those of the pretest task. Before the administration of both tests, their validity was established by five university teachers who reviewed them in light of the portions of the design statement.

Two researcher-developed assessment instruments were also used in the study. One was used for self-assessing the processes of writing, and the other for self-assessing the written products. The first instrument consisted of two main parts. In part one, each student was required to identify the writing strategies he actually employed against a checklist. This checklist was derived from the literature on the writing strategies used by good and poor writers (e.g., El-Mortaji, 2001; Feng, 2001; Hull, 1987; Murray, 1980; Raimes, 1985; Ruiz-Funes, 1999; Staples, 1997; Victori, 1995). These strategies were subcategorized into pre-, during-, and post-writing strategies. In part two, each student was required to estimate the extent to which the strategies he employed helped him to write about the topic he had just finished (see Appendix A). The second instrument consisted of 8 multiple-choice items. In this instrument each student was required to assess the writing subskills in his finished product (see Appendix B). Before the use of both instruments, their validity was established by five university teachers who reviewed them in light of the construct definition.

Procedures

Prior to the beginning of the study, the two classes participating in the study were randomly assigned to the two treatment conditions. Each of the two teachers of these classes was then provided with instructions for implementing the assessment technique assigned to his class. At the beginning of the experiment, the two groups were

pretested. Following pretesting, the writing process checklist was explained to the process group, and the product checklist was explained to the product group. During treatment, each student in the process condition self-assessed the processes he actually employed before, during, and after writing by means of the process checklist. In the product condition, each student self-assessed his written products by means of the product checklist. The study lasted a period of five months (one session per week). After the treatment period was over, the two groups were posttested. Then, the pre- and posttest compositions were scored by two independent raters.

Scoring

The quantity and quality of each composition were scored independently from each other. Quantity was measured, as Myers (1985, p. 75) suggested, by "a simple count of total words" in each composition, and quality was measured by counting the number of words in error-free T-units (Robb, Ross, and Shortreed, 1986). Prior to scoring sessions, the two raters were trained in the use of these scoring methods. Interrater reliability was also established for both dependent variables. It was found to be 0.94 for quantity and 0.86 for quality. During scoring, compositions with scores that differed by three or more points were read by a third rater and the extreme score was dropped. That is, the score for each composition was the average of two raters, either the first two raters, or in case in which a third rater was required, the average of the third rater and the closest score. To avoid scoring bias, the raters knew nothing about the nature of the study, and the subjects used identification numbers on their pre- and post-test compositions. Furthermore, the raters made no marks on students' compositions and recorded their scores on separate sheets.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All the data collected were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The level of significance was set at 0.05.

Pretest results

Table 1
The difference in the mean scores between the process group and the product group on the pretest

Group	N	Dependent Variables					
		Quantity			Quality		
		M	SD	T-value	M	SD	T-value
Process	40	44.5	7.3	0.40	20.6	6.9	0.53
Product	40	43.6	7.9		19.3	8.6	

As shown in Table 1, statistical analysis of the pretest data revealed that the two groups of the study did not differ significantly in the quantity or the quality of their writing prior to the beginning of the study ($t = 0.40$, $p > 0.05$; $t = 0.53$, $p > 0.05$, respectively). Therefore, the first hypothesis was accepted. This finding may be due to the fact that Egyptian teachers and students focus on the product of writing rather than the process at the pre-university level.

Posttest results

Table 2
The difference in the mean scores between the process group and the product group on the posttest

Group	N	Dependent Variables					
		Quantity			Quality		
		M	SD	T-value	M	SD	T-value
Process	40	76.9	6.4	9.30	29.19	10.4	5.06
Product	40	57.5	8.8		36.75	9.3	

As shown in Table 2, students in the process group scored significantly higher than those in the product group on the quantity of writing ($t = 9.30$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, the second hypothesis was

partially rejected. Two reasons may account for this finding. The first reason is that self-assessing the processes of writing might promote students' thinking skills which could, in turn, help them to develop their ideas and thoughts on paper. The second reason is that self-assessing the processes of writing might help students to develop effective writing strategies which could, in turn, help them to discover ideas and to elaborate them.

Results from the t-tests also indicated that students in the product group scored significantly higher than those in the process group on the quality of writing ($t = 5.06$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, the second hypothesis was completely rejected. Two reasons may account for this finding. The first reason is that self-assessment of the product of writing might help students to identify weaknesses in their writing conventions and to suggest possible remedies for these weaknesses which could, in turn, improve the quality of their writing. The second reason is that an overemphasis on the assessment of writing conventions might lead students to see the quality of writing as more important than quantity.

LIMITATIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The results of this study are limited by the sample size, the characteristics of the subjects, and the length of the study. Within these limitations, it can be concluded that the findings of the present study do not endorse self-assessing either the writing process or the written outcome to the exclusion of the other. In other words, the best technique for self-assessing writing appears to be a combination of both process and product. This conclusion supports Johnston's contention that "since instruction must be oriented toward language and learning processes, it follows that our assessment should similarly focus on these language and learning processes" (1987, p. 337). It also supports Hairston's (1982), Tompkins' (1994) and Wolcott's (1987) contention that writing instruction and assessment should take both process and product into account. As Hairston puts it:

We cannot teach students to write by looking only at what they have written. We must also understand how that

product came into being, and why it assumed the form that it did. We have to try to understand what goes on during the act of writing if we want to affect its outcome. (1982, p. 84)

This study suggests the following areas for future research:

- (1) Exploring the effect of involving students in group work while assessing their own writing processes on their writing;
- (2) Exploring the effect of self-assessing both the process and product of writing on students' writing;
- (3) Exploring the effect of explicit teaching versus self-regulating of the writing processes on skilled and unskilled writers' composition; and
- (4) Exploring the effect of self-assessing only one stage at a time versus all stages of the writing process on students' writing.

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Appendix A The Writing Process Checklist

Topic: ----- Date: -----.

(I) Read the following strategies, and check (✓) in the boxes the ones you actually employed before, during and after writing the composition you have just finished.

(1) Before writing, I

- decided on why I was going to write this composition. ☐
- determined who is my audience. ☐
- discussed the topic with colleagues sitting beside me. ☐
- discussed the topic with the teacher. ☐
- read about the topic. ☐
- collected ideas about the given topic through observation. ☐
- decided on the method(s) of development (e.g., description, comparison/contrast, cause-effect) to present my ideas. ☐
- related the topic to my personal experience. ☐
- asked myself questions I would like to answer in the composition. ☐
- conceptualized the content of the composition in a map. ☐
- spent no time preparing for this composition. ☐

Other (please specify): -----

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(2) During writing, I

- divided my composition into paragraphs. ☐
- stated the main idea of each paragraph in a topic sentence. ☐
- supported each topic sentence with details. ☐

☐ generated details about ideas through description. ☐
☐ generated details about ideas through definition. ☐
☐ generated details about ideas through comparison and contrast. ☐
☐ generated details about ideas through cause and effect. ☐
☐ scanned back over what I had written to determine next steps. ☐
☐ emphasized content rather than mechanics. ☐
☐ emphasized mechanics rather than content. ☐
☐ focused on the purpose of the composition. ☐
☐ considered the needs and interests of the reader. ☐
☐ used L2 to generate ideas. ☐
☐ used L1 to generate ideas. ☐
 Other (please specify): -----

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(3) After writing, I

☐ read what I had written to a colleague. ☐
☐ let my colleague(s) read my composition and comment on it. ☐
☐ let my teacher read my composition and comment on it. ☐
☐ discussed my composition with colleagues. ☐
☐ checked to see if I met the purpose for writing this composition. ☐
☐ checked to see if I developed the composition topic adequately. ☐
☐ checked to see if all information is directly related to the composition topic. ☐
☐ checked to see if the information in each paragraph is directly related to the topic sentence. ☐
☐ checked to see if details are sufficient. ☐
☐ checked to see if some information should be eliminated, changed or simplified. ☐
☐ checked to see if each paragraph builds upon the preceding one. ☐
☐ checked to see if each of my ideas is illustrated with several details. ☐

checked to see if there are smooth transitions between paragraphs. ☐

checked to see if some terms should be defined. ☐

corrected errors that impair communication. ☐

identified and corrected mechanical errors. ☐

Other (please specify): -----

(II) In your estimation, to what extent the processes you employed in this session helped you write the composition you have just finished?

(a) Not at all (b) A little (c) More than a little (d) Very much

Appendix B

The Written Product Checklist

Topic: ----- Date: -----

Respond to the following questions as they apply to the composition you have just written by choosing a, b or c.

1. Are there any grammatical errors in this composition?

(a) Yes (b) Somewhat (c) No

2. Are there any vocabulary errors in this composition?

(a) Yes (b) Somewhat (c) No

3. Are there any spelling errors in this composition?

(a) Yes (b) Somewhat (c) No

4. Are there any punctuation errors in this composition?

(a) Yes (b) Somewhat (c) No

5. Are there any capitalization errors in this composition?

(a) Yes (b) Somewhat (c) No

6. Is the content of this composition relevant to the topic?
(a) Yes (b) Somewhat (c) No
7. Is there a logical order of ideas in this composition?
(a) Yes (b) Somewhat (c) No
8. Is the language in this composition appropriate to the audience?
(a) Yes (b) Somewhat (c) No